
Review: Thomas Paine: Context, Text, and Presentism

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Reviewed work(s):

Tom Paine by John Keane

Source: *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Jun., 1996), pp. 216-225

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030648>

Accessed: 26/02/2010 19:03

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THOMAS PAINE: CONTEXT, TEXT, AND PRESENTISM

Laurence Dickey

John Keane. *Tom Paine*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1995. xxii + 536 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$27.95.

As a European intellectual historian, I have found it useful over the last few years to include lectures on Paine in my course on eighteenth-century thinking. In that context, Paine's writings, especially *Common Sense*, *Letter to Raynal*, and *Rights of Man*, help explain transformations in the thinking of English radicals from the 1770s on. Through its influence on Raynal's (and Diderot's) extremely popular *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (especially the third edition of 1780), *Common Sense* came to figure prominently in French constitutional debates of the 1780s. In the *Letter to Raynal* (1782), moreover, Paine responded to the *Histoire*—at least to the section on America that had been translated and published separately by R. Bell in Philadelphia in 1781 under the title *The Revolution of America*. Two 1783 French translations of Paine's *Letter* added a further Paineite element to the French constitutional debate of the 1780s. And as scholars have long known, *Rights of Man* (1791 and 1792) was perceived as an important contribution not only to the European debate about the French Revolution but to the politicization of the English working class as well.

Similarly, certain aspects of Paine's work—especially his choice of language—raise questions for the European intellectual historian about the role millenarianism played in the development of his political radicalism. And behind these questions looms the larger issue—now heatedly debated by students of English political thinking in the eighteenth century—of why so many European thinkers (e.g., Burke in England and the theocrats in France) as well as detractors of Paine in America in the 1790s (e.g., D. Levi and E. Boudinot) regarded the French Revolution as a religious as well as political event in Western history.

Because these concerns are grounded in European contexts they have remained more or less on the periphery of most studies of Paine in his American context. But that situation is rapidly changing for, as has been recently observed, a recent "mini-Paine revival" has tried to situate Paine in a

context that is simultaneously European and American—"Atlantic" to be more precise.¹

A review of recent Paine scholarship by Sean Wilentz has traced the new interest in Paine to presentist political considerations, considerations that involve, among other things, a struggle for hegemony over Paine between political parties on the right and left in Britain and America. To that end, much of Wilentz's review revolves around the question of Paine's relevance to the contemporary political debate.

As interesting as the presentist perspective is, there is a more scholarly side to the Paine revival. Many of the best recent contributions to Paine scholarship have come from scholars—Isaac Kramnick, Gregory Claeys, and Mark Philp—who approach Paine's political writings, especially *Common Sense*, with what the Cambridge school of political theory would call *language identification* in mind. For these scholars, what Paine scholarship needs to do is to come to terms with the "meaning" of *Common Sense*—a challenge that has little to do anymore with explaining how Americans read or were influenced by *Common Sense* in the 1770s, still less with how Paine figures in contemporary political debates. Rather, according to them, the task facing Paine scholarship today is to give a fuller historical account of how it was that *Common Sense* came to be written the way it was. More specifically, these scholars want to know two things: how *Common Sense* "worked" as a political argument in general; and what ideological resources Paine drew upon to write the pamphlet he did in 1776.

That much of the scholarship in the mini-Paine revival is language-oriented is easy to show. Kramnick (*Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism*, 1990), for example, sees the argument of *Common Sense* revolving around languages derived from identifiable Lockean, Dissenter, English Republican, and liberal economic sources. These languages provided the ideological components of what Kramnick calls Paine's "bourgeois radicalism." Claeys (*Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, 1989) interprets *Common Sense* as expressing a "novel" synthesis (though not one without inner tensions) of older republican and newer commercial modes of discourse. The resulting discursive mix, Claeys claims, gave rise to an ideology of "commercial republicanism" that promised that wealth and virtue could be reconciled in the American polity. Philp (*Paine*, 1989) slightly alters Claeys's discursive mix, for he interprets *Common Sense* as an effort to splice together a "rights-based" politics of liberalism and a tradition of republicanism that gave political priority to the obligation of citizens to promote the "public good." As Claeys also does, Philp points out that the tension between the "natural rights" concerns of the former and the "civic virtue" preoccupations of the latter was resolved in *Common Sense* when Paine hit upon the novel idea of using

eighteenth-century discourse about commerce to explain how commercial expansion could play an "integrative" role in a republic. With this idea at hand, Philp argues, Paine developed a de-politicized theory of republicanism which resulted in his giving priority to "society" over "government" in the argument of *Common Sense*. For both Philp and Claey's, moreover, Paine's preference for the former over the latter signaled the transformation of republicanism from an ancient to a modern key of discourse.

Needless to say, getting at the meaning of *Common Sense* (or any other of Paine's texts) has been complicated by the strategy of language or discourse identification. Where *Common Sense* was once thought to speak with a clear voice about liberty and about American political identity, it is now being viewed as a site where languages clash, where they are mixed (perhaps even confused) in creative ways, and where words are given new meanings. As J. G. A. Pocock (*Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 1985, p. 276) has observed, we now know that *Common Sense* neither fits comfortably into any particular context nor operates consistently with any single "radical vocabulary." That, though, is precisely the point of language identification studies; it makes for denser history, first by trying to identify and disaggregate the languages employed in texts, and then by paying close attention to how an author deploys these discrete languages in constructing the political argument of a particular text.

John Keane's book gives us a refreshing look at Paine's life. It offers a balanced and chronologically disciplined treatment of Paine's biography, writings, and times. To make this ambitious task manageable, Keane adopts what he calls a "contextual approach" to Paine's life. By that he seems to mean something quite simple, for the structure of the book suggests that Keane understands context in terms of the "wheres" and "whens" of Paine's writings. Not surprisingly, then, Part 1 deals with Paine in England; Part 2 with his life in America; Part 3 with his experiences in England and France in the late 1780s and 1790s; and Part 4 with Paine's final years back in America.

As Keane's narrative moves forward in time, we learn much about the hardships of Paine's life, the peculiarities of his personality, and the circumstances that lay behind the positions he took in his writings on the public issues of the day, especially from the 1770s on. But I would disagree with Wilentz's view that Keane's "description of the young Paine" in England "offers a plausible account of how an artisan's son and denizen of provincial ale houses could have gathered the intellectual forces that later produced *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*."²

After all, much that Keane has to say about Paine's intellectual (not to mention, sexual) life in England before his departure for America in 1774 is

speculative, and Keane systematically refuses to engage in the kind of reconstruction of ideological context that is crucial to a truly contextual approach to intellectual history. It is all well and good to insist—as Keane does—that his book is unique because it accepts the challenge of trying to understand “the English roots of Paine’s political identity” (p. xix). But a lack of evidence for Paine’s early life—at least until he moved to the town of Lewes in Sussex in 1767—makes it imperative that we proceed carefully when speculating about Paine’s links to eighteenth-century currents of thought. Above all, we have to avoid arguing for Paine’s assimilation of ideas by way of his biographical proximity to them. But that is a difficulty Keane fails to avoid when, for example, he suggests that Paine picked up republican ideas in his youth while playing “in the streets of Thetford,” his hometown for many years (p. 21).

Keane repeatedly resorts to surmise and conjecture to explain the “English antecedents” of Paine’s “democratic republicanism.” And along the way he makes decisions that raise questions about the scholarship of his book. Keane correctly follows other scholars in distinguishing Paine from what he calls the “classical” tradition of English republican thinking—a tradition Keane claims was “bookish” and grounded in “studious reflections” on the history of ancient republics (p. xx). Keane also says that Paine’s republicanism was “self-taught” (p. xx)—that it emerged from Paine’s “everyday experiences in England (p. xxi). Accordingly, Keane devotes Part 1 of his book to delineating the “firsthand” experiences that—“probably” is the operative word here—“sparked some radical [political] awareness” in the consciousness of the young Paine (p. 32). Given this assumption it is easy for Keane to detect a “developing political sense” in Paine and to then follow it forward in time as it became publicly articulated in Paine’s political writings in Lewes and America between 1767 and 1776 (p. 63).

Along the line of this trajectory there are, according to Keane, many instances of Paine’s politicization. Three such instances warrant our scrutiny. First, there is Paine’s experience of the multiple injustices of oligarchy during his “Thetford Days” (1737–1756). For Keane, these injustices were largely the responsibility of the “Grafton oligarchy,” a family that for generations had used its almost “absolute” power to oppress the plebian and preserve the patrician class there. Although there is no reason to question Keane’s description of how the Grafton oligarchy operated on certain levels (e.g., in dispensing patronage), his decision to portray the Grafton family in such black-and-white terms is open to question. As Keane admits, it downplays the fact that the third duke of Grafton, August Henry Fitzroy (1735–1811), held liberal, even radical, views on religion, politics, and America from the 1750s on which were quite similar to those later expressed by Paine in *Common*

Sense. (Grafton's long association with Edmund Law, who some scholars have called a Socinian is important here.) One wonders, therefore, what purpose is served by not allowing these aspects of Grafton's life to figure in a contextual account of the origins of Paine's radicalism. The answer is simple: Keane wishes to derive Paine's democratic republicanism from the Grafton-inspired injustices he perceived around him, in the streets of Thetford, as it were.

If Keane's decision to root the origins of Paine's early political identity in his experience of the Grafton oligarchy is problematic, so too is his handling of Paine's assimilation of Newtonianism. According to Keane, Newtonianism became an important ideological resource for Paine after he moved to London in 1757. At that time, Paine moved in social circles of Newtonians, unorthodox Anglicans, and Dissenters. In this context, Keane says, Paine was "introduced to a new culture of [Newtonian] political radicalism that rejected thrown and altar" (p. 43). Through his association with these "friends of liberty" Paine met Benjamin Franklin and discovered that Newtonian science could serve "radical" religious and political causes.

Obviously, Keane means for us to understand Paine's exposure to Newtonianism as part of his politicization experience. But there are serious problems here. It is not just that Keane has little evidence to work with but that he is conspicuously silent about the vast body of literature which now shows how at mid-century Newtonianism reinforced the ideological status quo more than it subverted it. In light of this, how do we know what Newtonian strain Paine was actually exposed to in London? Keane never discusses that crucial issue.

Keane's thesis about the politicization of the young Paine becomes more convincing when Paine moves to Lewes in 1767. There Paine's association with various clubs, whose political views we know something about, and his writings for a local newspaper, provide opportunities for assessing Paine's politics at a decisive point in his life. The problem, though, is that the conventional view of Paine's political development in England has always been that Lewes, a town with a history of Dissenter republicanism, was the site of Paine's conversion to republicanism. Keane, however, wishes to correct that standard view; but he does so simply by insisting that before moving to Lewes Paine had been "a political animal" whose republican sensibilities had been developing for some time. This claim, of course, is consistent with the politicization thesis. But it only works as an argument if we allow Keane to elevate his own speculations about Paine's "developing political sense" to the level of evidence.

Keane's interpretation of Paine's Lewes experience is open to question on yet another level. Take, for example, what he calls his "reasonable" surmise that as a member of the Lewes "Headstrong Club" in 1774 Paine not only

debated the American crisis but did so in light of John Cartwright's pamphlet *American Independence* (1774). Given that conjecture, it would have been appropriate—especially given the argument of *Common Sense* and the fact that Paine's Philadelphia publisher published an American edition of *American Independence* in 1776—to tell us something about Cartwright's views. Keane offers us nothing like this, leaving us to wonder what it was about Cartwright's piece that, in Keane's words, "most likely astonished Paine" (p. 67).

The missed opportunity here is all the more important because Keane claims (without citing just where this is written or said) that Benjamin Rush "was impressed" with Paine's early familiarity with Cartwright's work. Again, what was there to be impressed by? Although Keane is silent on this score, an inspection of Cartwright's pamphlet as well as of his equally famous *Take Your Choice!* (1776; 2d ed. 1777 under another title) reveals that many of the arguments of *Common Sense* were anticipated in Cartwright's work. Cartwright, in turn, cited James Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* (1774–75) in support of his argument for American independence. Burgh himself was widely read in America before and after 1774. In addition, he was a close friend of Franklin and Paine cited Burch in *Common Sense*. Yet, Keane never mentions him. Nor for that matter are Jonathan Shipley's equally famous sermons of 1773–74, sermons that were pro-American and that Franklin made sure were widely circulated in America in those years.

It would be easy, of course, to say that Keane could not be expected to do everything in a book that runs to over five hundred pages as is. But if you are going to use the "contextual approach" to Paine's life, and if you understand that approach as involving something more than biography, then Cartwright, Burgh, and Shipley have to be discussed for the purpose of reconstructing the ideological context of *Common Sense*. This is especially important, moreover, since one of the aims of Keane's study is to explain the instrumental role *Common Sense* played in "dragging" republicanism into the modern world. To fully appreciate Paine's achievement here, we have to know more about the views of those whom he (allegedly) moved beyond.

I mention all this because Keane's treatment of *Common Sense* is long on the text's reception and woefully short (just nine pages) on analysis of a text that Keane admits advances a "complicated" and "nuanced" argument (Keane devotes many more pages to Paine's bridge-building project of the late 1780s). For Keane, the argument of *Common Sense* has four basic components. By turns it offers (1) a sharp critique of monarchy; (2) an "altogether original" statement of why "society" rather than "government" was the agent of progress in the modern world; (3) an explanation of how the imperative of independence grew out of Paine's appreciation that England stood to America as a corrupt government stood to a self-governing society; and (4) a "final

stirring anthem for American citizens" that proclaimed that the cause of liberty in America henceforth would be *the* cause of all mankind.

All this is true, but given the current concerns of Paine scholarship this is elementary stuff—certainly not the scholarly direction in which the mini-Paine revival has been moving. A list of crucial themes in *Common Sense* that are not dealt with by Keane registers my level of disappointment with his treatment of the argument of *Common Sense*.

For starters, there is no discussion of the all-important tradition of Harringtonian criticism of mixed monarchy that begins in the 1650s and becomes later associated with what Caroline Robbins has called "sociological Newtonianism" (*Absolute Liberty*, 1959, p. 258). Paine's critique of monarchy in *Common Sense* as well as his own predilection for Newtonian formulations provide points of entry to both of these traditions of English thinking. In addition, there is no explanation of how either the English or the Scottish traditions of commercial discourse went about associating commercial expansion with the subversion of mixed (i.e., Gothic) as well as of absolute monarchies. Keane avoids the equally as old debate about how, in the eighteenth century, empires of conquest were giving way to empires of commerce. (Governor Pownall's writings on America are crucial in this regard.)

Also missing in Keane's account of *Common Sense* is an attempt to bring Scottish discourse about commerce as a socializing and civilizing agent to bear on *Common Sense*. Benjamin Rush had become familiar with this discourse while studying at Edinburgh in the 1760s. Rush's involvement with Paine while the latter was writing *Common Sense* is well known. Is anything about Rush or his time in Scotland relevant here? We are never told; but any inquiry in this direction would have enabled Keane to work his discussion of Paine's crucial distinction between "government" and "society" into the larger, ongoing Scottish debate about the role of commercial ideology in the "rise of the social" in eighteenth-century thinking. Is Paine as "altogether original" on this point as Keane suggests?

On another level, Keane credits Paine with having "cunningly nurtured the anti-Catholic language of Protestant Dissent" in *Common Sense*. Yet, Keane never explains what that language is or how it works in *Common Sense*. He could have, for example, followed Kramnick who, in an excellent essay on Burgh (*Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism*, 1990), has shown how certain groups of Dissenters in England and America developed a "Protestant social theory" which was organized—at least linguistically—around a binary opposition between the terms "idleness" and "industriousness." In that linguistic field, the English court and the aristocracy were idle, prone to luxury and, therefore, quite corrupt. Americans, by contrast, were industrious, frugal, and

honest. Much of the argument of *Common Sense* revolves around Paine's strategic use of those terms. Why not tell us something about that Protestant social theory?

The fact is that Keane hardly mentions the religious aspects of *Common Sense*, leaving us in the dark as to why there are so many millenarian (e.g., liberty moving ever westward) and providential (e.g., the coincidence of Columbus's discovery of the New World and the outbreak of the Reformation in Europe) formulations in a text that is suppose to be inventing "democratic republicanism."

Finally, Keane contends that in *Common Sense* Paine had attempted to "widen the definition of who counted as a citizen" (p. 127). Is it too much to expect some reference to Cartwright and Burgh here? After all, both had given currency to that idea before *Common Sense* had been published. To paraphrase Cartwright, it was "persons" not "property" that had to be represented in order for a political system to be legitimate and truly civilized. Is that important? And does Cartwright's grounding of that claim in God's communication of liberty to "persons" rather than "things" give a religious spin to Cartwright's own contention that America would be a model for liberty loving humans everywhere? We just are not told anything about these matters. Again, Keane asks his readers to do the kind of work he should be doing for them. If, as Keane claims, Paine oversaw a "revolution in political language," where is it? Certainly not in anything Keane tells us about *Common Sense*.

Keane is at once more and less helpful on the matter of Paine's cosmopolitanism, an issue that Keane addresses at two points in Paine's life—one before the French Revolution and another after the Revolution had run its course in the late 1790s. There are several aspects to the argument Keane develops here. He starts (pp. 213ff) by suggesting a connection between the "homeless" quality of Paine's life (marginality and anomie are other terms Keane uses to express this idea) and Paine's growing commitment to cosmopolitan values in the late 1770s and 1780s. In turn, Keane links this cosmopolitan commitment to Paine's use of languages of liberty and revolution that, in Keane's judgment, were agents of "the virtuous forces of enlightenment" (p. 232). It is in this context that Keane then places Paine's *Letter to the Abbé Raynal* (1782), a tract in which Paine, posturing as an international revolutionary, argues for the creation of universal citizenship and universal society. Needless to say, from here it is a short step to 1789 and to Paine's book, *The Rights of Man*, which celebrates that event.

After examining Paine's prerevolutionary cosmopolitan commitments, Keane proceeds to argue that toward the end of his life Paine had to square his cosmopolitanism with "the new spirit of nationalism" (p. 446) that

emerged throughout Europe in the aftermath of 1789. Here Keane advances an important distinction between nationalism, which Paine deplored as pathological, and the formation of national identity among self-determining peoples, which he supported, to account for the ideological predicament in which Paine found himself as the French Revolution became increasingly nationalistic and belligerent. Keane's is a useful distinction; but, as he admits, Paine never made it—which means that as “cosmopolitanism declined at the hands of nationalism” Paine's cosmopolitan politics became increasingly irrelevant, perhaps even utopian (p. 448). That depressed him and intensified the self-destructive tendencies in his personality. The prosaic circumstances of Paine's final years back in America underline, biographically, the fate of cosmopolitan ideals after the French Revolution.

All this is interesting, though hardly new, and Keane is right at these two points in his study to try to place Paine in the “history of eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism” (p. 448). But Keane does not do that, for once again he refuses to explain how cosmopolitanism worked as an argument for liberty and revolution before 1789 but not afterwards. It is easy, of course, to cite prerevolutionary thinkers (e.g., Kant) who saw no tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in eighteenth-century thinking. All the same, many Dissenters (e.g., Richard Price) and many radical republicans (e.g., Thomas Hollis) consistently deployed the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism in the tracts they wrote against the English government and the British empire. On the one hand, they criticized the government for its nationalistic economic policies. On the other hand, they criticized the Church of England for its religious nationalism. As an alternative to the former, the cosmopolitans offered up free trade; as an alternative to the latter, these same cosmopolitans offered a millenarian perspective in which a Christian commitment to “universal benevolence” overrode loyalty to the Anglican Church.

These are two ideological tendencies of the late eighteenth century that scholars seldom correlate. Yet there they are—coexisting comfortably in *Common Sense*, the *Letter to Raynal*, *The Rights of Man*, and many late-eighteenth-century tracts, a number of which were written by radical Dissenters. Perhaps it is cosmopolitanism's capacity to accommodate the economic argument of the one and the religious argument of the other that needs to be explored here. Surely, the combination of the one with the other had something to do with the appeal of cosmopolitanism as a language of liberty in the eighteenth century. Indeed, if Keane wished to identify Paine as the agent of a “revolution in political language” (p. x) in the eighteenth century, it is in this intersection of economic and religious discourse that he should have looked, not in the conditions of Paine's “homelessness.” The latter may have helped make Paine a free-floating intellectual and an international revolution-

ary, but it is more likely that the revolution in language actually developed out of more broadly ideological currents. Those currents are part of Paine's context, and they need to be historically acknowledged before we can begin to discuss Paine in such indulgent presentist terms.

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1. Sean Wilentz, "The Air Around Paine," *The New Republic* 212 (1995): 34-41.
2. Wilentz, p. 39.